

# The Global Information Environment & 21st Century Warfare: Targeting Public Opinion in the 5th Dimension

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**Editorial Abstract:** This article won a US Army Information Operations Proponent (USAIOP) annual writing contest award in 2006. MAJ Schmidt looks at a cross section of historical and contemporary influence operations, and how these are both at home and at odds with Western culture. He proposes a US Government plan of action engaging a range of players using non-traditional approaches.

If terrorists throughout the world and insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan understand one thing, they understand that American public opinion is a major center of gravity. The term center of gravity (COG) in the military sense is very similar to the term in the scientific sense. The COG is the point in an object where its mass is concentrated. From the military perspective, when we identify and attack our enemies' COGs, we are attacking those points where they have massed their force or their capabilities to exercise their will. Put another way, if we destroy the enemy's COG, his force, capability, and morale will crumble.

The US Armed Forces cannot fight and win wars without the American public's support. If terrorists and insurgents can effectively influence American public opinion, they can affect our strategy, operations, and tactics. This effectively infiltrates and disrupts our decision-making process, forcing us to become reactive and lose the initiative. Our enemies do not need to engage in prolonged conventional confrontations (as in the streets of Fallujah, Iraq, or the villages of Afghanistan) to accomplish this. All they have to do is stage periodic, horrific acts of terrorism that become media events.

Therefore, we see improvised explosive devices, beheadings, ambushes on civilian targets, attacks on symbols of American power, and suicide bombers. Terrorists take a wheelchair-bound hostage and dump him overboard at sea, bomb a poorly-protected Marine barracks, drag a naked, dead soldier through the



*A sea of opinions. (Defense Link)*

streets of Mogadishu, and crash jetliners into our skyscrapers, knowing video footage of their depredations will be shown over and over again. This makes for great press and even better ratings, as it erodes American public support and morale.

Since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism, periodic heated public debates have broken out over the US Government's use of certain tactics during information operations campaigns. In one instance, public outcry led to the closure of the Department of Defense's Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). In another, DOD was hotly criticized for contracting self-described business intelligence companies to conduct public relations on its behalf in Iraq. Words matter. Whether it's called IO, public relations, public diplomacy, or propaganda, Americans citizens and media are sensitive to any perceived management of the information they receive.

Syndicated columnist and political analyst Mark Shields stresses "strategic communication" must be based on in-depth, quality research and knowledge of the opponent and target audience.

Democratic pollster Fred Yang adds, "The media must be used for the purpose of informing, motivating, and mobilizing" the public to take an intended action.

Soon after 9/11—on 30 October 2001, to be exact—DOD stood up OSI to take the lead on a global IO campaign. Within four months, the office's intent and motives had received so much negative media publicity that DOD closed it. However, only the office's name was given a conspicuously awkward and speedy farewell. Other DOD organizations have the same mission and purpose, including the Office of Global Communications, the Information Awareness Office, the Information Operations Task Force, and the Counter-Disinformation/Misinformation Team (also known as the Counter-Information Team). The point here is that information operations are a legitimate and effective form of warfare. Not to use them aggressively and relentlessly is to cede to the enemy a strategy, operation, and tactic that should be our main GWOT effort.

## Background and History

Examples of IO include, but are not limited to, operations as simple as pamphlet drops over targeted foreign population centers to warn them of impending violence, or to apply public pressure on the targeted adversary, military or foreign governments to seek a non-violent, diplomatic resolution of grievances. Pamphlets may provide warnings, recommend civilian courses of action, or even threaten impending doom to enemy combatants.

Initially implemented at the beginning of the Cold War to “promote democratic values and institutions by disseminating factual information and ideas,” many observers credit government broadcast media with playing a major part in the downfall of the Soviet Union. Outlets such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Afghanistan, and Radio Free Iraq are examples of IO that target foreign audiences. Sponsors include the United States Information Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency.

In today’s global communications environment of 24-hour news networks and worldwide interconnectedness, the US Government must consider our domestic population a target audience. The word “target” may make critics wince, but there are targets we must protect from the enemy, just as there are targets we must destroy. US public opinion is a target that we must protect, because it is vulnerable to outside, subversive influences.

To better understand this need, we must put IO into an historical context. The Romans pioneered information operations through edicts, writings, and art to regulate, govern, and control the Roman Empire. The term “propaganda” originated in 1622 during the Thirty Years War when, under the leadership of Pope Gregory XV, the Catholic Church founded the “Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith” (*sacra congregatio christiano nomini propagando*)—the Jesuits—to spread Catholicism and regulate religious communications.

The US media and its influence on American public opinion evolved during the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Vietnam. As [T.E.] Lawrence of Arabia observed in 1920, “The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armory of the modern commander.” Media influence on US public opinion was particularly

evident during the Spanish-American War, when newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst discovered the level of violence many in the US believed would eventually lead to war, did not exist. Hearst is credited with telling his journalist in Cuba, “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war” so that his chain could sell more papers. The media has a target audience in everything it produces. This is an example of the media targeting the government.

Modern American IO and public relations have their roots in the World War I-era “Committee for Public Information,” whose members included journalist Walter Lippmann and psychologist Edward Bernays (Sigmund Freud’s nephew). The committee coined the terms “group mind” and “engineering

would not succeed without the support of US public opinion.

Voluntary cooperation between the military and the media began to erode following World War II and reached a low point during the Vietnam War. As technology advanced, journalists became more mobile, independent, and global in perspective, and did not rely so much on government information. Journalists who filed stories from the front lines during World War II brought US public awareness out of a cocoon. America and the media became less isolationist in nature and more international in outlook.

World War II was an example of conventional warfare on a grand scale. Conventional forces defeated the enemy, adversarial governments surrendered, and

foreign populations cooperated with victorious military forces and obeyed their orders. The Vietnam War was the reverse. It provides a classic example of low-intensity conflict or guerilla warfare in which the guerilla force cannot succeed conventionally and, therefore, relies on the information environment to gain advantage and build public support before it confronts enemy forces in open battle.

During the Vietnam war, the relationship between the government and the media began to disintegrate. Critics of US efforts say a failed DOD public relations strategy damaged the military’s credibility. The media interpreted the practice of publicizing enemy body counts and hiding embarrassing incidents of political and military failures as attempts to cover up more serious problems. The Watergate scandal further eroded the media-government relationship. The media reached a level of near paranoia in its distrust of the government and the military. It could not believe that either organization would provide timely and honest information, facts, and statistics. As a result, suspicion, distrust, and dismay befell both sides. The military blamed the media for its failures in



*Looking different directions in the whirl of influence operations. (Defense Link)*

consent,” and is credited with laying the foundation for the modern public relations industry—and the use of information operations as a method of warfare.

During World War II, America engaged in an epic struggle with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan (the first “Axis of Evil”), and newspapers and radio were the US public’s primary information sources. Journalists were embedded within military units; they even wore US military-issue uniforms. In effect, the military and the media were in voluntary collusion to reassure Americans and to nurture support for the war effort. Both groups knew America

Vietnam, and the media clearly did not subscribe to Winston Churchill's belief that there must be a "bodyguard of lies" to protect US interests.

The reasons for this failure in cooperation are many. First and foremost, the media resisted what it perceived as an attempt to manage and manipulate it, in order to foster support for the war. From the perspective of the US National Command Authority, the failure to wage information warfare was a failure to command.

Such friction between the government and the "fourth estate" might be necessary in a liberal-democratic society. Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Victoria Clarke, notes "a very healthy tension" exists between military and the media. But open antagonism between the two estates ultimately benefits neither, and it puts our nation in peril. News reporters, and print journalists in particular, are justifiably concerned with maintaining credibility, legitimacy, and public trust in their independent reporting. By contrast, the government and the military see the media as a vehicle to use to communicate a message to the American people and the international community. Put another way, in the interest of national security and to protect the lives and safety of US military forces, the government and military seek to manage the margins of messages entering the public domain.

Today, our information war against America's enemies is global. It is waged in the villages of Kandahar, on the streets of Baghdad, on the Web, and in every major media corporation's 24 hour newsroom. Fighting the IO conflict is not a military undertaking, but a political war. Paul Bremer, former chief administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, knew how important it was to make not only Iraqis but also Americans and US allies aware of Iraq's progress. We must fight the IO conflict not just in the environments and minds of our enemies and targeted foreign audiences, but in the hometowns and living rooms of the United States as well.

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld observed "our enemies are operating 24/7 across every time zone [and we are not]. That is an unacceptably dangerous deficiency." To fight in this new dimension, the United States must engage adversaries globally, 24/7, in peacetime, in times of conflict, and in times of war. The United States must accept reality and engage across the full spectrum of warfare.

### Accepting Reality

In many ways, information operations are not much different from political, commercial, and private public relations, media, and marketing campaigns. If the Republican and Democratic National Committees, Coca-Cola, Nike, and McDonald's can do it, why can't our government use the same successful methods to target many of the same audiences? Is it because we are a liberal democracy that IO seems to be so distasteful? Is IO too reminiscent of the propaganda of oppressive regimes in world history? Or is it just an easy media target for stirring up controversy?

Some military observers suggest information operations are a form of marketing—and there are many similarities between them. In IO, military planners use a targeting process characterized by the "decide, detect, deliver, and assess" cycle. Marketing and advertising agencies use a similar "discover, define, design, and deliver" cycle. Both seek the same outcome: to produce physical and psychological responses. On this basis, advertising is a form of propaganda; marketing is a form of IO.

Similarly, is commercialism infecting how the United States wages information operations? Many academics and professional journalists argue that hyper-commercialism is rampant within the media and press. Indeed, journalists know this to be true. In a Georgetown University lecture, journalist Kathy Kiely claims the media openly panders to the "wants" of its audience instead of its needs, and "commercial pressure drives the news."

Many also believe major media conglomerates are consumed with profits, profitability, and market share. These are commercial enterprises with little, if any, public fiduciary responsibility. Why shouldn't the US Government conclude it is logical and reasonable to influence the media's actions, coverage, and product, instead of passively depending on "fair and balanced" coverage of the GWOT?

Some political scientists believe the values of journalism are fundamentally at odds with those of government. Author Thomas E. Patterson says the press routinely distorts issues by focusing on controversy, scandal, conflict, and public opinion polls. Patterson argues the press is not equipped to give order and direction to political coverage. They are miscast, he says; the public expects the media to do what they are incapable of doing. If this is true, shouldn't government representatives work within this flawed paradigm in the interest of national goals and objectives?

Further, noted journalist Jack Germond argues that journalists should not care about "making the world safer for democracy" and the media "should not strive to fulfill some pseudo-civic purpose other than to report the truth responsibly." Businesspersons, politicians, and political campaigners understand this. The American public and government should also understand and accept this reality, and either engage the media in an environment of commercialism, or circumvent the media altogether.

If the US Government and DOD are to execute our Nation's wars efficiently, effectively, and successfully, they must adopt aggressive IO strategies and tactics. If they are to be honest brokers, ensuring timely, accurate dissemination of appropriate information to the public at the appropriate time, they must protect and nurture their credibility. Not doing so would be irresponsible and pose a threat to the lives of military service members and our ability to ensure national security. In this interest, we must regard the full spectrum of IO (public relations, public diplomacy, public affairs, marketing and

advertising, psychological operations, and propaganda) as essentially the same. They all have the same goal: to influence target audiences to make decisions beneficial to America.

### The War of Ideas

Americans think of war in a physical sense, but war is a product of its times, and Americans are behind the times. Terrorists are confronting the United States in an information environment. Given a choice, we expect terrorists will choose the path of least resistance: they will attack the softest target. Terrorists have taken our freedoms—specifically, the freedom of the press—and turned them against us. In the GWOT, our very freedoms can lead to failure. The information environment, a sacred arena for liberal democracies and the freedoms they espouse, is composed of the full spectrum of international media, its conduits, and content. The fact that nearly every American has a television (sometimes one in each room) and most have Internet access gives terrorists the ability to reach into our homes and offices to spread their messages of hate and fear. They can affect our most basic behaviors: how we travel, communicate, interact, educate ourselves, and vote.

Retired Army officer Ralph Peters believes the US Government and DOD are building a military that thinks victory depends on technology and transformation, that unmanned machines can replace Soldiers on the battlefield, and that America's technological innovations and capabilities are changing the way we fight. However, according to Peters, the battles of the future will actually be epic battles of ideas, will, faith—and, admittedly, flesh—and we will fight them for decades to come.

In US Army doctrine, information operations are employed purely as a secondary effort to support the main physical, kinetic effort. However, in the GWOT, "terror" is an ethereal concept, tactic, and strategy, and information operations—the "war of ideas"—must be our main effort. Terrorists understand this, they "act in the physical environment not to make tactical gains in the physical

environment, but to wage a strategic battle in the information environment; therefore the physical environment enables many of the activities in the information environment to occur." This is why we should be concerned about "winning the battle and losing the war" and continued comparisons of Iraq to Vietnam. If military forces—and by extension the US Government—fight only in the physical environment, they only fight a tactical battle, as if one hand is tied. In the current campaigns, the United States has unapproachable air superiority and dominance. It must now achieve and maintain information superiority and dominance.

Today's "epic battle" has a virtual battlefield, fought in the hearts, minds & media of American and foreign societies. Opportunities to exploit the information front present themselves, but unfortunately, and probably for political reasons, DOD has shied away from public debate on this topic. After the OSI debacle, they seem to prefer a tangential approach.

In the minds of many, contracting IO efforts to consulting firms such as the Lincoln Group and the Rendon Group seem perfectly justifiable courses of action. After all, this is an accepted business and political campaign practice. Private lobbying and public relations firms have much more latitude in how they ply their trade, and from a legal perspective, use of contractors distances the US from controversial IO methods and performance.

Political consultant Thomas J. O'Donnell believes that "all [political] techniques are legitimately transferable to public diplomacy campaigns" and that "engineering consent" is not diabolical. He believes IO success involves three crucial imperatives: control the dialogue; preempt attacks; and counterattack relentlessly. When an organization successfully controls the message, it achieves an advantage that it must then vigorously defend. O'Donnell urges his clients to be proactive because they cannot depend on the media to transmit their messages. "You have to do what is necessary to win. The risks are too high to risk losing," he implores.

DOD must focus on "developing, coordinating, deconflicting, and monitoring the delivery of timely, relevant, and effective messages to targeted international audiences." To counter adversary actions and challenges in a very fluid, dynamic, multi-dimensional conflict, our government must continually update and refine IO goals, objectives, themes, and messages.

### Nothing New

Many military leaders and government officials do not understand why US IO is so controversial. President Ronald Reagan, the "Great Communicator," successfully employed IO. President Bill Clinton's "quick response" strategy crushed every attack by his opponent with an immediate barrage of rhetoric. Call it "spinning," campaigning, or IO, but both US Presidents sought to control the message permeating the media. Information operations are a form of public relations. Why do the media and the public admire the public relations skills of politicians and abhor the same skills when military officers use them in the interest of national security?

Perhaps World War II, Vietnam, and Cold War precedents have led us to regard propaganda as a dubious method of warfare. Because of this false rationale, the media and the public seem to regard government IO as "lying" and have the romantic notion that democratic governments and countries at war should not do such things. All manner of conservative and liberal special interest groups, advocates, bloggers, and "spinmeisters" are free to engage in IO, but doing so is taboo for the US military and government.

John McArthur, publisher of *Harpers*, seems to agree that IO should be off-limits to the government: "Lying from under the cover of anonymity to a [public audience] is merely public relations." The *Los Angeles Times* reports, "The military's effort to disseminate propaganda in the Iraqi media is taking place even as US officials are pledging to promote democratic

principles.” Both McArthur and the Times’ writer imply public relations and IO are fundamentally opposed to democracy. But they are not; they are a part of democracy, a great experiment and human endeavor that is not a sacred cow, but a goal to fight for using all available means. To suggest otherwise is naïve, hypocritical, and dangerous.

### The Marketplace of Ideas

Alexis de Tocqueville, a very insightful observer of American media during America’s formative years, describes how “the influence of the liberty of the press does not affect political opinions alone, but it extends to all the opinions of men, and it modifies customs as well as laws.” In other words, the “press effect” is real. The media might vehemently deny “they do not form public opinion, they merely reflect it,” but this is simply not true. Those who subscribe to this logic deny reality.

Tocqueville lamented that he could see no tenable position “between the complete independence and the entire subjection of the public expression of opinion . . . .” He correctly observed that any protest or prosecution of the media for the abuses it perpetrated only brought attention and legitimacy to the abuses. Tocqueville concluded, “In order to enjoy the inestimable benefits which the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils which it engenders.”

Today we note media hyper-commercialism has affected public discourse. Tocqueville reminds us this is no new trend: “In America three quarters of the enormous sheet which is set before the reader are filled with advertisements, and the remainder is frequently occupied by political intelligence or trivial anecdotes.”

Is it possible that we are amusing ourselves to death, as Neil Postman postulated in 1985? Should we believe that unelected media representatives with no legal or formal public fiduciary responsibility have the best interests of the United States in mind, or should we believe that they aim to please their corporate owners, sponsors,

and advertisers by ensuring a competitive and profitable market-share? Tocqueville would submit that the latter is a greater likelihood. If so, then the government must enter the marketplace of ideas and communicate its goals and objectives to its domestic and international audiences. But how?



*One exhibition in the marketplace of ideas. (Defense Link)*

### What to Do

The DOD and Interagency communities must become more proactive. In fact, the IO war would be better waged outside of DOD. The Defense Department is miscast as the lead agency in this effort. The State Department’s Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs should be the tip of the international IO spear, and the White House Office of Communications should lead domestic public relations efforts. The General Accounting Office recommends that the US Government formulate a comprehensive interagency strategic framework and plan for public diplomacy.

In 2003, the Defense Department produced a comprehensive IO Roadmap outlining how to move forward in the IO arena. While good for DOD, this article recommends a Roadmap adaptation for eventual government-wide adoption. The following recommendations derive from the declassified version of the October 2003 DOD Information Operation Roadmap”

The US Government should:

- Make it a policy to engage in IO activities worldwide to the maximum extent permitted by law, while lobbying for the removal of current restrictions and limitations that prevent a global approach to targeting adversaries, non-adversaries, and domestic and international audiences. This would most likely require a “Presidential Finding” plus Congressional cooperation.

- Establish clear IO definitions with policies that outline authorities and boundaries for execution. Synchronize public affairs and psychological operations to support domestic and international IO strategy. Ensure an appropriate relationship between these activities, one that helps achieve the US public diplomacy strategy.

- Create a long-term, comprehensive, interagency IO strategy led from the White House for government-wide communication to both domestic and international audiences. Ensure accountability and visibility of IO resources.

- Establish measurable IO themes, goals, and objectives based on providing timely, truthful strategic communications where appropriate while retaining deception, misdirection, and misinformation in the IO lexicon and arsenal.

- Continue to increase funding for IO efforts, including domestic programs. Develop a trained and educated workforce with language and cultural proficiency and expertise for all target audiences. Fully fund, man, and equip those offices directed to engage in IO activities. Increase capital investment to fund and staff IO offices and equip them with the most advanced communications capabilities.

- Develop IO as a core competency within government operations. The government’s message is too important to rely on private industry to disseminate it. Invest in public service announcements, advertisements, and infomercials. Adopt

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comprehensive, proactive, and coherent messages that facilitate the achievement of US Government goals and objectives. Ensure synchronization of political messages and military operations to foster public support.

- Develop partnerships and advisory councils and continue to contract with private-industry public relations firms, the motion picture industry, and media conglomerates. Governmental offices and agencies outside of DOD should execute this initiative.

- Develop “off-shore” capabilities to influence target audiences globally. The State Department and other governmental agencies with overt and covert operational capabilities should execute this initiative.

- Increase US Government-sponsored domestic media, including enhanced Internet, print, radio, network, and cable television capabilities. Use the British Broadcasting Company, the Armed Forces Network television stations, and the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper as examples. Make sure these media are widely available and aggressively marketed domestically.

- Maintain an aggressive “media-embed” strategy that provides increased access to local, hometown media outlets. Develop and grow a grassroots media network that can potentially circumvent traditional establishment outlets.

- Begin permanent, continuous, and unremitting overt and covert offensive campaigns against enemy IO capabilities and execute them relentlessly during peacetime and war. Develop IO target sets that support full-spectrum engagement with both kinetic and non-kinetic options.

- Increase targeting of governments and entities that support, facilitate, and provide sanctuary for the abrogation of women’s rights.


- Obscure the line between humanitarian assistance and military assistance to support US goals and objectives.

- Attack the terrorists’ credibility and morality. Do not let terrorists hide behind religion. Humiliate, shame, and disgrace them by showing how their violent actions contradict their religion’s code of conduct.

In order to defeat terrorism, we must make terrorists fear our intentions, capabilities, and will. “Fair and balanced” is a good TV network slogan, but a suicidal military maxim. Successful warriors gain and exploit advantages; they do not intend to fight fair. The US Government cannot defeat terrorism by responding to it in a fair and balanced way. The strategic management of information will not undermine our democratic values.

Americans must not cower and flinch in the face of terrorism. We must maintain our deep, long-term resolve. The United States cannot conduct strategic IO while it tries to win an international popularity contest. Nor can it win over the unwinnable hearts and minds of a hostile population. We must accept this reality and wage an uncompromising war on terrorism that never declares “mission accomplished,” that denies the enemy sanctuary and satisfaction during times of war and peace, and that forces him to live in terror himself.

The US Government must maintain its credibility and pursue an aggressive strategic communications strategy. These two objectives are not mutually exclusive. However, once credibility is lost, no communications strategy will effectively restore it. Strategic communications and information operations must strive to provide the American public and media with the information they appropriately need to know, while encouraging the debate on constitutional claims to a right to know, as defined by today’s media.

We cannot accept Tocqueville’s premise that “in order to enjoy the inestimable benefits which the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils which it engenders.” To accept this premise would be to surrender to our adversaries in the fifth dimension of warfare. To fight our adversaries and protect America, we must use credible and legitimate methods that lie “between the complete independence and the entire subjection of the public expression of opinion.” 

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